

## Book Review *Advanced Focus Group Research*

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Edward F. Fern, *Advanced Focus Group Research*. London, United Kingdom, SAGE, 2001. ISBN 9780761912491. 264 pages.

This article is a review of the book, “Advanced Focus Group Research” by Edward F. Fern, Sage Publications, London. The author has a high reputation in qualitative marketing research, especially for small-group research, focus group research, and qualitative research methodology. The book was published in 2006 with the purpose of providing beneficial information about focus group research for academicians and practitioners. Different from other handbooks of focus group research, the extensive principles for using focus group in different contexts were addressed for the correct use and implementation. In addition to extending knowledge of focus group research, the book incorporated and analyzed the insightful findings from different studies about the qualitative research amongst different countries around the world so as to portray the nature of focus group process and type of respondents from different cultures. The contents in this book were divided into 10 chapters. In the early chapters, the author introduced all components in small-group research, for example, group composition, the research setting, the focus group moderator, and so forth. Later on, in chapters 7-10, the author integrated advanced knowledge in focus group research and applied to different typologies of focus group research; exploratory, experiential, and clinical research group. The book is very helpful for experienced interviewers or moderators who desire to gain the insight in conducting focus group research from academic point-of-view.

**Keywords:** qualitative research, focus group research, small-group research

Focus group research has been using popularly in the twentieth century as one of the most important tools for qualitative research, either in the field of academic or marketing research. Nonetheless, the theory of focus groups has been written for research practitioners as a part of qualitative research. Different from ordinary research books, the author of advanced focus group research attempted to accumulate findings about focus group research from previous academic studies to explain different types of focus group research and provide guidelines for readers so as to implement in individual studies with comprehensive language. Beyond how-to books, the unique of this book is the writer gave the insightful direction for experienced researchers from applied to theoretical content as a guideline in using focus group research. Applied research for focus group research in the book was explaining about designing and implementing focus group research under different environments appeared in case studies which value organizations to make decision in using focus group research align with organization's goal, strategy, and day-to-day operation. Additionally, theoretical research appeared in the book was to provide learning from case studies across various fields of study along with focus group research process which is very beneficial for professors or graduate students to develop focus group knowledge under various fields of study. Therefore, this book helps to uncover the nature of focus group at intensive and extensive levels, across many disciplines, for all audiences who are interested in understanding more about focus group research.

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## **Book Overview and Summary**

The main content of this book is primarily in the form of sharing experience from qualitative researchers. The author clearly addressed the complexities and problems of focus group research derived from his experiences in conducting qualitative research. In all sessions, advanced principles of using focus group research are raised together with concrete solutions for all issues across the research process in order to setup and control environmental factors before conducting focus group. For research practitioners, the book can be a starting point for learning the controversial notions in focus group research.

At the beginning, the author made a good introduction of the book by elaborating conceptual framework to summarize the theory of focus group process and implying the framework in all chapters to connect audiences with the central structure of this book. Moreover, the framework of the book showed that the author has plenty of knowledge in small-group research with well-organized and comprehensive explanation for all components. The construction of this framework also reflected the attempt of authors in making the book more powerful and valuable by deeper analyzing and implementing focus group research in different contexts.

The author divided content in this book into 10 chapters. In the first chapter, or the synopsis of the book, the author stressed that the book does not like the focus group kits which practice new researchers how to conduct the focus groups. But mainly, the way of better understand about focus group research were raised and reviewed by differentiating focus group tasks as well as extending the use focus group research in new research areas. The style of illustrating focus group research was unique and became value for this book to develop fundamental knowledge of focus group research. The author also used different purposes of research to explain briefly about various typologies of focus groups, including exploratory, experiential, and clinical tasks, which make this book remarkable and outstanding. Additionally, the conceptual framework was well organized and elaborated the whole process of focus group comprehensively before reading through the book.

The core concept of chapter 2 relates with the characteristics of respondents and group composition that affect group cohesion. In this chapter, unlike common handbook of focus group research, the book showed deeply psychological analysis about recruiting participants and planning small-group research. The author took into account group cohesion as one of the key factors in conducting focus group research since it is the motivation to establish group dynamic during the discussion. In terms of social factors, cultural value orientation and interpersonal relations are two main elements that shape participants' personality in the groups. After that, race, ethnic, gender, and age were reviewed from different global studies to extend its effects on self-disclosure in the group discussion. The implementation to use psychological theory, namely big five model of personality, to specifies the different trait of participants in focus groups is valuable for advanced moderators to better understand types of participants and learn how to handle with them. The author claimed that different personalities of participants in the group are important for the outcome gained from the groups.

In chapter 3, the author provided in-depth information about how to design setting and environment suitable with small-group discussion. The author reiterated these factors may affect how participant feel at ease to share their personal information in front of others. The book did not just recommend basic guidelines to manage group interaction, the author

showed many empirical researches around the world which explained about privacy management and personal space in the group. At the end of chapter, the author analyzed the factors lead to social interaction in the focus groups which is flexibly implemented for all types of focus group research and respondents as the guideline for moderators to deal with setting and environment align with group interaction they desire to see.

The style of the focus group moderators is referred in the chapter 4. In contrast to the description of ideal moderators in practical books for qualitative research, the intention in this chapter was to define moderators' personality fit with different typologies of focus groups. Beyond basic skills of moderating focus groups, advanced skills for conducting focus groups, such as active listening skills, or analyzing body language, were highlighted in detail with case studies. In sum, this session showed the belief that moderators should use different styles of moderation in different situations to encourage participants to share their ideas with others. There is no single rule for style of moderation in the studies. Sometimes, race, ethnic, and religion of moderators also have a strong impact on discussion in the groups.

In chapter 5, the author divided the process of focus group discussion into six steps: globality, differentiation, social integration, mirror reaction, condensing and information exchange. The importance of each stage is required to be fully understood to establish self-disclosure environment in the group. Nevertheless, at the end of this chapter, the author emphasized more on other factors that affect focus group process, especially for social influence. Although some parts of this chapter are repetitive, but sharing experiences in dealing with tough situations in focus group discussion is well-informed for organizing unexpected situations which conducting small group discussion.

Since there are controversial notions about the representative of respondents and how to generalize the information obtained from the focus group, the main purposes of chapter 6 are to show the role of recruiting participants and to understand how to reach and explore information from reliable people in the groups. The author firmed that expertise in using specific recruiting methods to identify and qualify potential people or a focus group study is very important since it affects the ways of analysis to confirm or establish new theories.

Exploratory, Experiential, and Clinical tasks for focus group research were explicated in chapter 7-9. In detail, the author clearly explained research objectives and methodologies for all types of studies. Even though all types of research objectives are complicated and unique from traditional focus group research, the author specified the strengths and weaknesses of the studies and proposed how to integrate knowledge from earlier chapters with each type of studies accordingly which help the readers to implement and follow through easily.

In the last chapter, the author summarizes the conceptual framework for focus group process from input to outcomes in steps. The debate for using focus groups was pointed out in this chapter to develop future focus group research. For example, the issues about quality and quantity information obtained, or the issues about reliability and validity of conversation from focus group.

## **Conclusion**

This is the first review of advanced focus group research book. Compared to other qualitative research books, this book is different from prior practical focus group research

books. In the past, there are the series of books on focus group interviewing which include *The Focus Group Guidebook* (Morgan, 1998), *Planning Focus Groups* (Morgan & Scannell, 1998), *Developing Questions for Focus Groups* (Krueger, 1998), *Moderating Focus Groups* (Krueger, 1998), *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups* (Krueger & King, 1998), and *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results* (Krueger, 1998). These focus group books mainly explain the purposes and the whole process of focus group through researchers' experience and academic knowledge. The topics in the books elaborate detailed knowledge from the beginning (Preparation) to the end of focus group interview (Analysis and reporting). These books are able to clarify some unexpected issues in the focus groups and provide the checklist and the guideline for focus group preparation to accomplish focus group project that meet research objectives. However, these books seem to be suitable only for beginners or graduate students who desire to use focus group for their research project.

Advanced focus groups research raised controversial issues in all the steps of focus groups such as group composition, research setting, or analysis of data in focus group interviews. The authors analyzed the focus group process deeply and proposed tangible solutions for unexpected situations if it occurred in any of the steps. For example, free riding was considered as one of the influential problems for social interaction during the group, or time management was proposed to be compensatory in their effects on idea production. Besides, the entire of this book also reports case studies that are related with the contents in all chapters explicitly. Readers can use the book for reference in the academic researches and find the original papers from bibliography for further studies.

Therefore, the application of advanced focus group research book may not be limited only in social or marketing research, but this book can be extended to use in other fields as readers can learn from many case studies such as clinical or nursing researches. This book can initiate idea of using focus group research with the advanced guidelines to develop new knowledge under different contexts in the new era of modern research.

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